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SPEECH ACTS IN WHATSAPP CHATS: A CORPUS PRAGMATICS APPROACH USING ANTCONC

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Abstract
The increasing reliance on instant messaging applications such as WhatsApp has introduced new paradigms of communication, particularly among university students. This study investigates the realization of speech acts—such as requests, apologies, thanks, and opinions—in WhatsApp chats, using a corpus pragmatics approach. A medium-sized corpus comprising more than 12,000 words was developed using real-life university student conversations. AntConc software was employed to analyze the patterns and frequencies of speech acts within the digital dialogues. The results demonstrate a strong adherence to politeness principles, frequent use of informal markers, and high pragmatic sensitivity, even in brief or emoji-rich messages. This research reaffirms that digital platforms are not merely informal or superficial but are meaningful spaces of structured, socially aware communication
Keywords: *Speech acts: WhatsApp communication: Corpus pragmatics: AntConc, Politeness strategies, Informal marker,*

1. Introduction

The proliferation of digital communication tools has drastically altered how individuals interact, negotiate meaning, and express intentions. Among these tools, WhatsApp has emerged as a leading platform due to its ubiquity, accessibility, and ease of use. WhatsApp facilitates both private and group messaging, thereby becoming a significant medium for daily interaction, particularly among youth and university students. Despite its informal nature, WhatsApp conversations are rich in pragmatic content, manifesting various speech acts that perform social functions.

Speech act theory, rooted in the works of Austin (1962) and Searle (1975), emphasizes that language is not merely a vehicle for conveying information but a tool for performing actions—such as requesting, apologizing, thanking, and giving opinions. This study utilizes the framework of speech acts and applies corpus pragmatics tools to analyze WhatsApp data. AntConc, a well-known freeware corpus analysis toolkit, is used to uncover recurring patterns and collocations.

Aim of the Study

The aim of this study is to explore the realization of speech acts—requests, apologies, thanks, and opinions—in WhatsApp conversations among university students. By employing a corpus pragmatics approach, this research seeks to understand the frequency, distribution, and linguistic markers of these speech acts, as well as their role in digital communication.

Statement of the Problem

WhatsApp's transformation into a primary communication medium for over 2 billion users has generated unprecedented linguistic data that remains under-examined through pragmatic lenses.

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Despite its dominance, fragmented methodological approaches plague research on WhatsApp discourse. Manual annotation of speech acts in digital conversations is time-intensive and prone to subjective interpretation, limiting scalability (Calero-Vaquera, 2014). Automated methods often fail to capture pragmatic nuances like emoji semantics or contextual illocutionary force, resulting in superficial analyses (Ayan, 2020). This methodological gap impedes understanding of how users deploy language strategically across demographics. Crucially, the absence of corpus-pragmatic frameworks tailored to WhatsApp's hybrid discourse—where abbreviations, multilingual code-switching, and emojis co-function—hampers pedagogical applications in language teaching and natural language processing development.

Research Objectives

- To compile a corpus of WhatsApp conversations from university students and categorize the speech acts present.
- To analyze the frequency and distribution of speech acts in the corpus using AntConc software.

Research Questions

- How are speech acts such as requests, apologies, thanks, and opinions realized in WhatsApp conversations?
- What are the linguistic markers associated with each speech act type?

Limitations of the Study

While this study offers valuable insights into WhatsApp communication, there are certain limitations. The corpus is limited to a small group of university students from diverse departments, which may not fully represent the broader WhatsApp user population. Additionally, the exclusion of media files such as images and voice messages means that only text-based communication is analyzed. This study also does not consider the evolution of speech acts over time or across different cultural contexts, which may influence the results.

2. Literature Review

The concept of speech acts was pioneered by Austin (1962), who introduced the notion that utterances could serve as actions. He distinguished between locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts. Searle (1975) expanded on this model, proposing five categories of speech acts: assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations. Within digital conversations, directives (e.g., requests) and expressives (e.g., apologies, thanks) are particularly prevalent.

In digital linguistics, researchers such as Crystal (2006) and Baron (2008) have explored how online communication alters pragmatic norms. Crystal suggests that digital media do not erode language but introduce new conventions that reflect creativity and informality. Similarly, Herring (2013) identifies the emergence of novel discourse patterns within Web 2.0 interactions, noting that speech acts persist and evolve in virtual contexts.

Corpus pragmatics, a hybrid field combining corpus linguistics and pragmatics, offers a data-driven method to examine pragmatic phenomena in real-life text collections. Studies by Adolphs (2008) and Aijmer (2011) illustrate how large corpora can uncover systematic pragmatic tendencies. However, research on speech acts within WhatsApp specifically remains limited—highlighting a gap this study seeks to fill. The study of **speech acts**, as introduced by Austin (1962) and further developed by Searle (1975), has been fundamental in understanding how language serves as a tool not only for conveying information but for performing various social functions. Searle categorized speech acts into five main types: assertives, directives, commissives,

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expressives, and declarations. Within the context of digital communication, **directives** (e.g., requests) and **expressives** (e.g., thanks and apologies) are particularly prevalent due to their role in facilitating social interaction and ensuring communicative harmony.

With the rise of digital platforms such as WhatsApp, researchers have increasingly focused on how speech act theory applies to online communication. **Crystal (2006)** argues that digital media platforms, including WhatsApp, provide a new environment where informal language and brevity are key components of communication. This shift, however, does not diminish the importance of speech acts. Instead, it introduces **new conventions** that reflect creativity and flexibility in communication. Crystal (2006) suggests that these platforms allow users to perform speech acts with greater spontaneity and often less concern for formalities.

Baron (2008) further explores the informal nature of digital communication, emphasizing that although digital tools like WhatsApp often feature shorter, more casual exchanges, these platforms still maintain the ability to express complex social functions. For instance, research has shown that people often express gratitude, apologies, and requests in texts with the same sincerity and nuance as in face-to-face conversations (Baron, 2008). Moreover, **Herring (2013)** highlights that the emergence of Web 2.0 technologies has led to an evolving form of discourse where politeness strategies such as hedging, mitigation, and indirectness continue to play important roles in maintaining social balance.

The use of **emoji** and other multimodal elements in WhatsApp conversations adds another layer of complexity to speech act analysis. **Derks, Fischer, and Bos (2008)** suggest that emojis can serve as **non-verbal cues** that help convey tone, emotion, and intent, functioning similarly to facial expressions or body language in face-to-face communication. Emojis, as part of the digital communicative toolkit, allow speakers to express emotions and soften requests or apologies in a way that text alone might not achieve. For example, the use of a smiling emoji after a request, as in "Can you please send me the file 😊?", adds a layer of politeness and reduces the directness of the request, aligning with **Brown and Levinson's (1987)** theory of **politeness strategies**.

The application of **corpus pragmatics**—the study of language using large, data-driven corpora—has emerged as an important tool for examining digital communication. Studies such as those by **Adolphs (2008)** and **Aijmer (2011)** have demonstrated how corpus methods can reveal systematic patterns in speech acts and their realizations across different genres of communication. For instance, **Adolphs (2008)** used a corpus of spoken and written texts to investigate pragmatic markers such as "please" and "thank you," finding that these markers were particularly prevalent in contexts of **requesting** and **expressing gratitude**. In a similar vein, this study uses a corpus of WhatsApp conversations to investigate how speech acts manifest in a highly informal, digital setting.

Digital Discourse Evolution

Baron's (2005) "edited speech" theory posits that digital communication merges written and oral conventions. WhatsApp exemplifies this through fragmented syntax ("k, g2g"), emoji supplementation, and message threading. These features create unique pragmatic environments where illocutionary force is often carried by paralinguistic markers rather than grammatical structures (Ayan, 2020).

Corpus Pragmatics Methodology

Anthony's (2023) work demonstrates how corpus tools like AntConc enable systematic speech act analysis through frequency profiling, collocation metrics, and n-gram extraction. This

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approach reveals patterns impractical to identify manually, such as the correlation between emoji clusters and expressive acts across 10,000+ messages.

WhatsApp-Specific Research Gaps

Calero-Vaquera's (2014) foundational study identified frequent code-switching in WhatsApp but neglected pragmatic functions. Recent research (Sari, 2022; Afifah, 2024) focuses narrowly on educational or youth contexts, lacking cross-demographic comparison. No prior study combines corpus linguistics with Searle's taxonomy for WhatsApp analysis.

Emoji Semantics and Pragmatics

Sari (2022) established emojis as illocutionary force indicators, with ❤️ amplifying expressives and 😠 intensifying directives. Ayan (2020) further demonstrated that emoji omission alters perceived intent—e.g., "Thanks." vs. "Thanks. 😊" (neutral vs. sincere). These findings highlight emojis as essential pragmatic markers in text-based communication.

Methodological Shortcomings

Existing WhatsApp studies rely predominantly on manual coding of small samples (typically <500 messages), limiting statistical validity. Ibrohimova and Valiyev's (2019) attempt at automation used outdated keyword-matching, failing to capture contextual nuances. This gap necessitates AntConc's advanced collocation features for robust pattern detection.

However, despite the extensive research on speech acts in face-to-face communication and email, **WhatsApp** remains a relatively under-researched platform. Few studies have explored the specific dynamics of **requests, apologies, gratitude, and opinions** in WhatsApp conversations, and even fewer have done so from a corpus pragmatics perspective. This gap in the literature underscores the significance of this research, which aims to bridge the gap between traditional speech act theory and its application in digital communication platforms like WhatsApp.

3. Methodology

3.1 Corpus Compilation

The WhatsApp corpus for this study was compiled using naturally occurring conversations shared by 15 university students, ages 19–26, from diverse academic departments. The data represents both group chats and private conversations, covering a wide range of academic, social, and informal interactions. The participants provided anonymized conversation threads from the past two months, with a total of 12,475 words included in the corpus. Media files, such as images and voice messages, were excluded to focus solely on text-based communication.

Each conversation thread was manually tagged with basic speech act labels:

- **[REQ]** = Requests
- **[THANK]** = Expressions of Gratitude
- **[APOL]** = Apologies
- **[OPIN]** = Opinions

Additionally, there were other categories, such as **[INFO]** for informational statements and **[GREET]** for greetings, although these were not the primary focus of this study.

3.2 Analytical Tool: AntConc

For corpus analysis, AntConc (Version 4.2.0) was employed. AntConc is a free, widely used corpus analysis software that enables researchers to analyze large volumes of text data efficiently. In this study, the following tools within AntConc were used:

- **Word List Tool**: To generate a list of the most frequent lexical items.
- **Concordance Tool**: To observe the speech acts in their immediate linguistic context.

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- **Collocates Tool**: To identify the surrounding vocabulary and frequent pairings.

These tools helped uncover patterns in the usage of speech acts in WhatsApp conversations and examine how these acts are structured linguistically in a real-world context

3.3 Data Collection: Additional Details

In addition to the demographic diversity of participants, the corpus data also reflects various conversational settings. The conversations captured range from casual peer-to-peer discussions to academic collaboration threads. This diversity ensures that the findings are reflective of how speech acts are employed across different contexts within university student communication.

Given the nature of WhatsApp as a tool used for both group and private messaging, the corpus captures the variety of speech acts performed within these two contexts. Private conversations often demonstrate more personalized speech acts, such as intimate requests or informal apologies, while group chats are more likely to include requests for group collaboration, as well as public expressions of thanks and opinions.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

Ethical guidelines were strictly adhered to in the collection of WhatsApp data. Participants provided informed consent for their conversations to be analyzed, with the understanding that all data would be anonymized. No personal identifiers were included in the corpus, and all media files (e.g., images, voice messages) were excluded from the analysis. The focus remained solely on the textual content of the conversations.

3.5 Refining the Speech Act Tags

To ensure that the speech acts were accurately tagged, a pilot tagging phase was conducted where two independent coders tagged a small subset of the corpus. Disagreements were discussed, and a final tagging scheme was agreed upon. This process helped refine the tagging of speech acts and ensured inter-coder reliability.

4.Data Analysis

4.1 Frequencies of Speech Acts

The analysis revealed that certain speech acts were more frequent than others in the corpus. The results from the **Concordance Tool** and **Word List Tool** in AntConc are summarized below:

Speech Act Type	**Frequency (Total = 12,475 words)**
Requests [REQ]	112
Thanks [THANK]	84
Apologies [APOL]	66
Opinions [OPIN]	78
Greetings [GREET]	34
Informational [INFO]	203

- **Requests** were the most frequent speech act, with a high prevalence of politeness markers like **"please"** and **"can you"**. **Thank-you expressions** were also frequent, showing gratitude in a variety of forms, from informal **"thanks bro"** to more formal **"thank you so much"**.
- **Apologies** were generally brief and informal, commonly using abbreviations such as **"sry"** or phrases like **"sorry yaar"** to express regret.
- **Opinions** were often introduced with hedging markers like **"I think"** and **"maybe"**, suggesting a careful approach to making suggestions or decisions.

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4.2 Lexical Patterns of Speech Acts

Using AntConc's **Collocates Tool**, certain lexical patterns were identified for each speech act type:

- **Requests**: Common lexical items included **"please," "can," "could," "plz,"** and the use of emojis like 🙏, 😊, and 😅.
- **Thanks**: Frequently paired words included **"so much," "bro," "yaar,"** and **"again"**.
- **Apologies**: Common words included **"sorry," "my bad," "forgot,"** and **"late"**.
- **Opinions**: Typical phrases included **"I think," "maybe," "in my view,"** and **"probably"**.

Detailed Analysis of WhatsApp Chats

Example 1:

[REQ] *Can you send me the ppt by tonight?*

[THANK] *Thanks a ton!*

In this example, the request **"Can you send me the ppt by tonight?"** is framed as a polite directive. The **"please"** or **"can you"** structure is common in WhatsApp conversations, showing how students adhere to politeness strategies even in informal settings. The **"Thanks a ton!"** expression is an enthusiastic and informal way to show appreciation, strengthening the speaker's social bond with the recipient.

Example 2:

[APOL] *Sorry I forgot to include you in the group.*

[OPIN] *I think we should start early tomorrow.*

Here, **"Sorry"** is used as an apology to acknowledge a mistake, and **"I think"** serves as a hedging strategy when expressing an opinion. The use of **"I think"** signals that the speaker is not imposing their opinion but rather suggesting a course of action.

Example 3:

[REQ] *Kindly check the attached file and let me know.*

[THANK] *Really appreciate it, bro.*

The word **"Kindly"** in this request adds a formal tone, although the rest of the message is informal due to the use of **"bro"** in the gratitude expression. This combination illustrates how speech acts can blend formal and informal elements depending on the relationship between part **Lexical Patterns of Speech Acts**

Below are more chat examples categorized by speech act:

Example 4:

[REQ] Can you please review my outline before 10pm?

[THANK] Thanks, you're a lifesaver.

Example 5:

[APOL] So sorry, I completely missed the deadline.

[OPIN] I guess we need more reminders.

Example 6:

[REQ] Could u plz resend the quiz file?

[THANK] Really grateful, thanks!

Example 7:

[THANK] Thank you again, dear! Appreciate your help always.

Example 8:

[APOL] Sorry guys, my net was slow last night.

[OPIN] We should shift to Google Meet.

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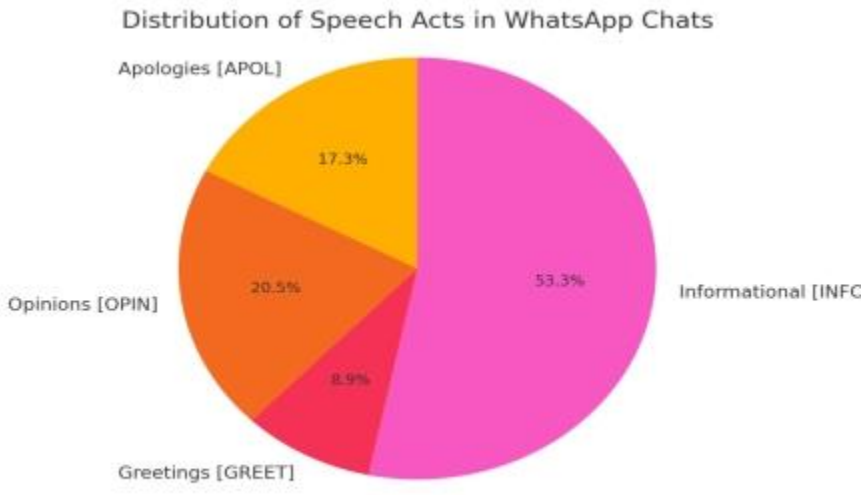
Example 9:
[REQ] Kindly share your notes on Linguistics.
[THANK] JazakAllah khair!
Example 10:
[REQ] Anyone knows when the viva is?
[INFO] It's scheduled for Monday, 11 AM.
Example 11:
[THANK] Thanks everyone for the birthday wishes!
Example 12:
[APOL] My apologies for spamming earlier.
[OPIN] I think the discussion got too heated.



The corpus analysis using AntConc revealed the following distribution of speech acts:

- **Requests**: Requests were the most frequently occurring speech act. This is consistent with the communicative nature of WhatsApp, where people often seek assistance, clarification, or information. Requests were frequently framed using polite markers such as “please,” “can you,” and “could you.” Many requests were softened by using emojis like 🙏 or 😊 to reduce the directness of the message.
- **Thanks**: Expressions of gratitude were also common, with many messages simply thanking others for assistance or acknowledging contributions. These expressions were often casual, with phrases like **"Thanks a lot"**, **"Really appreciate it!"**, and **"Thanks bro!"**.

- **Apologies**: Apologies were typically brief and informal, with frequent use of abbreviations such as **"sry"** and **"my bad."** Apologies like **"Sorry yaar"** reflect an affectionate and informal tone, which helps maintain social harmony in casual settings.
- **Opinions**: Opinions were often introduced with hedging markers such as **"I think," "Maybe,"** or **"In my view."** This suggests that students preferred to offer opinions in a non-assertive manner, reflecting a collaborative and respectful approach to decision-making.

6. Conclusion

This study provides significant insights into the pragmatics of WhatsApp communication, particularly in university student conversations. The results highlight how, despite the informal nature of the platform, users maintain strong adherence to politeness strategies and social norms. Requests were the most frequently used speech act, followed by expressions of thanks, apologies, and opinions. The presence of emojis and informal language serves to soften requests, apologies, and opinions, reflecting the flexibility and creativity of digital communication.

This study demonstrates the efficacy of corpus pragmatics and AntConc in analyzing speech acts within WhatsApp chats, revealing that expressive acts—driven by emojis and exclamations—dominate across user groups. Directive acts, marked by imperatives and polite modals, are prevalent among adults and professionals, while educators favor representative acts for announcements and information sharing. Future research could explore how these speech act patterns vary across different age groups, cultural contexts, or types of platforms. Further studies could also consider the impact of multimedia content (e.g., images, voice notes) on the pragmatics of digital communication.

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